Postmodernism, Hyperreality and the Hegemony of Spectacle in New Hollywood: The Case of The *Truman Show*

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After the screening of *The Matrix* on its first release, a dear cousin of mine, film connoisseur and avid fan of classical movies, spontaneously made the following comment: "This is an entirely new cinema to me!" If anything, *The Matrix is* a clear marker of cultural change. A film with state-of-the-art production values like this is bound to elicit in us the belated realization of how slow our response has been to the cultural products of an entirely transformed film industry, that of New Hollywood. My cousin's casual and unwitting remark reflects the embarrassment felt by both professional critic and layman alike in coping with contemporary movies, especially when we still tend to approach New Hollywood products with the standards of the Old Hollywood cinema. Because of our adherence to tradition, we still tend to look for those classical values of "development", "coherence" and "unity" in narratives only to find with disappointment that narrative plots become thinner, that characters are reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes and that action is carried through by loosely-linked sequences, built around spectacular stunts, dazzling stars and special effects. "Narrative complexity is sacrificed on the altar of spectacle" (Buckland 166) as today's blockbusters turn out to be nothing but calculated exercises in profit-making, all high-concept, high-gloss and pure show.

Similar cries of warning about the loss of narrative integrity to cinematic spectacle have been voiced at different periods, usually at times of crisis or change in the history of the American cinema. One could cite, for example, Bazin's disdain at the "displacement of classicism" by the baroque style, marking the end of the pure phase of classical cinema.[1] His coined term, "superwestern, "designates the "emergence of a new kind of western" (Krämer 290), that, according to Bazin, "would be ashamed to be just itself, and looks for some additional interest to justify its existence — an aesthetic, sociological, moral, psychological, political, or erotic interest" (150-1). Similarly, in 1957 Manny Farber, taking his cue from Bazin's superwestern, laments the "disappearance of this [classical] production system and the closing of action-oriented neighborhood theaters in

the 1950s". He claims that directors like Howard Hawks "who had flourished in 'a factory of unpretentious picture-making' were pushed towards artistic self-consciousness, thematic seriousness, and *big-budget spectacle* "(Krämer 293, emphasis added). A decade later, Pauline Kael too expresses her fears at the disintegration of filmic narrative which she attributes to the abrasion of traditional film production in general. She laments not only the emphasis on "technique" "purely visual content," and "open-ended, elaborate interpretations" of the experimental and innovative art film of the New American Cinema, but as Krämer puts it,

> she was equally critical of the experiences facilitated by Hollywood's mainstream releases. The lack of concern for coherent storytelling on the part of producers and directors in charge of the volatile and overblown process of filmmaking was matched by the audience's enthusiastic response to spectacular attractions and shock effects, irrespective of their degree of narrative motivation. (296)

Voices of dissatisfaction were heard at another major turn in the history of Hollywood, that is in the late 1970s, when the "unprecedented box-office success of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), signaled Hollywood's aesthetic, cultural and industrial re-orientation towards movies with more emphasis on special effects and *cinematic spectacle*" (Krämer 301). Unlike the classical movies produced on the assembly line under the studio regime (films that respected narrative integrity and refined story ideas into the classical three-act of exposition, complication and resolution), the products of New Hollywood, says critic Richard Schickel, seem "to have lost or abandoned the art of narrative.... [Filmmakers] are generally not refining stories at all, they are spicing up 'concepts' (as they like to call them), refining gimmicks, making sure there are no complexities to fur our tongue when it comes time to spread the word of mouth"(3). Contemporary cinema has come to depend so much on shrewd marketing and advertising strategies that its pictures, as Mark Crispin Miller points out, "like TV ads, ... aspire to a total 'look' and seem more designed than directed" (49).

The difficulty that critics nowadays face with films like *The Matrix* and the new situation in Hollywood, is not only unlike the layman's inability to assess "any recent Hollywood film as a discreet textual artifact that is either 'better' or 'worse' than the artifact produced under the studio regime," Cook and Bernink note (99). It has also to do with regarding "the textual form of recent Hollywood as expressive of changed production circumstances that lead to a different kind of textual artifact"(ibid.). In other words, as we move on in our globalized, high-tech age, it is becoming increasingly difficult to regard any single movie as a self-contained, autonomous text. On the contrary, as Eileen Meehan contends, it has become imperative to look upon any New Hollywood mainstream release "always and simultaneously as text and commodity, intertext and product line" (31).

In order to revise our critical standards and respond effectively to the new status of the contemporary Hollywood movie, we need to grasp the dramatic changes that the American film industry has undergone in the post-classical period, which started right after World War II and culminated to a point of radical transformation in the post-1975 period, which has eventually come to best warrant the term *New Hollywood*.[2] These changes have been lucidly described in a number of historiographic studies (Ray 1985, Balio 1985, 1990, Schatz 1983, 1993, Gomery 1986, Bernardoni 1991, Corrigan 1991, Hillier 1992, Wasko 1994, Krämer 1998, Neale and Smith 1998, Cook and Bernink 1999) which collectively shed ample light on the completely new situation defining New Hollywood.

What has drastically changed is both the ways movies are made and the ways in which Hollywood has been doing business. After the government's dismantling of the "vertically-integrated" studio system, the industry turned to producing and selling motion pictures on a film-by-film basis, resulting in the shift of power from studio heads to deal-makers (agents), in the rise of independent producers/directors, and in a more competitive and fragmented movie marketplace (Schatz 9). To the rise of TV and the emergence of other competing media technologies (VCRs, Cable and Satellite TV) Hollywood responded with a re-orientation towards blockbuster movies, "these high-cost, high-tech, high-stakes, multi-purpose entertainment machines that breed music videos and soundtrack albums, TV series and videocassettes, video games and theme park rides, novelizations and comic books" (Schatz 9). Despite the "increasingly fragmented but ever more expanding entertainment industry – with its demographics and target audiences, its diversified multimedia conglomerates, its global(ized) markets and new delivery systems", the calculated blockbuster, as New Hollywood's feature film, remains the driving force of the industry (ibid.).

This is testified by the monumental success of the blockbuster at the box-office. Schatz cites *Variety's* commissioned study of the industry's all-time commercial hits, in which only 2 movies of the classical period appear to have reached the top, whereas "90 of the top 100 hits have been produced since 1970, and all of the top 20 since *Jaws* in 1975"(9). The big-budget, all-star, spectacular hits of the late fifties and early sixties (such as *The Ten Commandments, Ben Hur, Cleopatra, or Dr. Zhivago*) have some sizable profits to show for (all in the vicinity of $25-to $50 million). By the standards of their age, they were considered colossal box-office successes; however, by today's standards they seem quite puny contestants to the post-75 era of super-blockbusters which generate record-setting grosses, well beyond the $100 million barrier (always in constant dollars).

And such a figure applies only to theatrical rentals, which accounts just for a percentage of the total revenue of a movie which also finds outlets in ancillary markets. The industry's spectacular growth and expansion (its horizontal integration) is to a great extent owing to the take-over of the majors (Paramount, Fox, Columbia, MCA/Universal) by huge media empires (Warner/Time Communications, Murdoch's News Corporations, Sony, Matsushita, respectively) forming multimedia conglomerates with diverse interests in the domestic and the

global market, with holdings in movies, TV production, cable, records, book and magazine publications, video games, theme parks, consumer electronics (both software and hardware). These huge corporations provide financial muscle for the multi-million production budgets of the blockbusters (since the production costs have themselves sky-rocketed), but also market muscle for promotion.

Marketing and advertising strategies have been the key to the unprecedented success of the New Hollywood movie since *Jaws:* through pre-selling, usually cashing in on the popularity of a novel published prior to production, a movie becomes a media "event" by heavy advertising on prime-time TV and the press, as well as by the massive simultaneous release in thousands of mall-based multiplex theaters. Calculated blockbuster productions are carefully designed to ensure the greatest potential profit not only through extended theatrical rental (sequels, re-issues, remakes, director's cut), but also though capitalization in ancillary markets: soon the movie will come out on videocassette, audio-cassette, novel, computer game, and the increasingly popular since the mid-nineties, DVD, let alone an extended market career through by-products ranging from the CD movie soundtrack to T-shirts and toys, which contribute to the impressive surge in profits. It becomes obvious thus why contemporary movies cannot be conceived of as individual entities and cannot be separately examined from their economic intertext that renders them part (or rather the driving belt) of a larger entertainment machine and advertising campaign.

Expensive blockbusters, which in the early days of the post-classical period were the exception and now, as Schatz states, have become the rule, "are the central output of modern Hollywood. But what, aside from costs, are their dominant characteristics? How are they able to attract, engage and entertain millions of people?" asks Warren Buckland (166). The blockbuster syndrome has also changed the movies' mode of address. Designed around a main idea, what is called "high concept", a blockbuster becomes

> increasingly plot-driven, increasingly visceral, kinetic, fast-paced, increasingly reliant on special effects, increasingly "fantastic" (and thus apolitical), and increasingly targeted at younger audiences. And significantly enough, the lack of complex characters or plot [as for example] in *Star Wars* opens the film to other possibilities, notably its amalgamation of genre conventions and its elaborate play of cinematic references. (Schatz 23)

But while these movies enjoy a great popularity among younger audiences, as their huge box-office success indicates, the loss of narrative integrity to spectacle, and the sense of escapism and triviality usually associated with high-gloss, star glamour and dumb show, has driven most academics or old-cinema cinephiles to summarily shun or dismiss blockbusters as merely calculated exercises in shameless profiteering.

Warren Buckland thinks that these arguments about the loss of narrative

potential in the contemporary feature film are overstated and attempts to reverse the "unhelpful and hostile evaluative stance" (167) of the critics towards the blockbuster. Focusing on a typical action-adventure blockbuster, Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Arc* he proposes adopting an analytical and descriptive approach to these films, an approach dubbed by Bordwell and Thompson "historical poetics." Part of the argument he makes is that "historical poetics" can account for the popularity of movies with such a broad appeal (and allows us to take them seriously as aesthetic, cultural objects) "especially because movies are examined in terms of their individuality, including their response to their historical moment, in which style and composition respond to the historical questions posed in the culture in which the film is made" (168-169).[3] In other words, the issue is not so much about the so-called death of narrative—because narrative is still alive and well—but the emergence of a new kind of narrative, whose meaning is conveyed not through traditional narration but by emphasis on spectacle and the visual impact of the pictures which provide additional narrative pleasure and have changed the patterns of viewer response. Thus Buckland's concluding remark that "it is perhaps time to stop condemning the New Hollywood blockbuster and to start, instead, to understand it," carries more merit than we have been ready to admit.

My intention in this essay is to extend the argument about the narrative/spectacle issue in the direction suggested by Buckland, but within a wider, cultural perspective. The supremacy of the visual and the spectacular over traditional narration in the textual form of contemporary movies is not only expressive of the changed production values and the text's signifying practices; it is also reflective of the changed cultural patterns and lifestyle habits in postmodernity. Classical cinema favored traditional storytelling because it provided a univocal interpretation of life and reflected a uniformity in entertainment habits: cinema was the predominant form of entertainment, as "the movies attracted 83 cents of every U.S. dollar spent on recreation" (Ray 26). Its nineties counterpart, with its emphasis on the sensational and the spectacular, on episodic action and generic diversification, is a postmodern cinema entertaining the possibility of multiple signification and the hyperreality of the visual, subject to an increasing commodified experience. As Anne Friedberg puts it, "today the culture industry takes on different forms:

> Domestic electronics (fax, modems, cable television) follow the interactive model of dialogic telephone communications. The personal computer turns the home user into a desktop publisher, the microwave turns every cook into an instant gourmet, the Walkman transforms each listener into a radio programmer. Both production and reception have been individualized; the culture industry no longer speaks in a univocal, monolithic voice. (189)

This proliferation of entertainment venues offered to the individual points

to a general malaise often regarded as the central feature of postmodernism, what Featherstone terms "the fragmentation and overproduction of culture — the key-feature of consumer culture" (76). As Jameson says, "in postmodern culture, 'culture' itself has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself" (1991 x). In the "cultural logics of late capitalism," Jameson's code-phrase for postmodernity, what is commodified is not simply the image, which has acquired central role in contemporary culture but lived experience itself. As Guy Debord diagnoses in *The Society of the Spectacle,* "everything that was lived directly has moved away into a representation (1983 np). Baudrillard, as Friedberg notes, also talks about "the same phenomenon — representation of the thing replacing the thing — and extends it into a mise-en-abîme of the 'hyperreal,' where signs refer only to signs. Hyperreality is not just an inverted relation of sign and signifier, but one of receding reference, a deterrence operation in the signifying chain"(178).

A part in this process of the commodification of the sign and the derealization of the real has been played by media technologies, especially electronics, as Vivian Sobchack points out:

> The postmodern and electronic "instant" ... constitutes a form of absolute presence (one abstracted from the continuity that gives meaning to the system past/present/future) and changes the nature of the space it occupies. Without the temporal emphases of historical consciousness and personal history, space becomes abstract, ungrounded, flat — a site for play and display rather than an invested situation in which action "counts" rather than computes. Such a superficial space can no longer hold the spectator/ user's interest, but has to stimulate it constantly in the same way a video game does. Its flatness — a function of its lack of temporal thickness and bodily investment — has to attract spectator interest at the surface. ...In an important sense, electronic space disembodies. (57)

In *How to Read a Film* (1981) James Monaco had put forth the argument that economics and technology determine to a great extent the influence on or interrelationship of one art form to another, claiming that cinema had taken over the novel's traditional role as a storytelling art, driving the novel away from mimesis and toward self-consciousness. With the advent of Television in the post-classical period, cinema lost "its cultural hegemony as the predominant form of entertainment" (Turner 18). In the wake of computer and digital technology cinema has been driven to adopt the aesthetics of TV and move away from traditional narration to the sensationalism of grand spectacle and show-biz enterprising. It seems we are witnessing a transitional phase in the history of the film industry, in which New Hollywood has found itself part of a wider and

profound cultural change, a postmodern moving-image culture effected to a large extent by the emerging "virtual-reality" technologies.[4] Some acute readers of the postmodernist phenomenon, like Jameson, refrain from admitting such a technological interpretation as "the ultimately determining instance" in our present-day social life or cultural production (Denzin 42); however, recent studies, such as Denzin's (1991, 1995), offer a probe into the essentially visual character of the postmodern society of the spectacle, drawing on postmodern social theory and the representation of the postmodern self in a number of contemporary mainstream Hollywood movies. Or, Anne Friedberg's new-historicist account of "the commodification of a mobile and virtual gaze," traces the cumulative and wide ranging effects of cinematic and televisual apparatuses on contemporary culture and the social formation of the postmodern subject. Finally, Vivian Sobschack (1994), attempts an existential phenomenological investigation into the dynamic relation between objective material technologies (cinematic and electronic representation) and the structures of experience and perception which re-define the spatio-temporal and bodily existence of the human subject in everyday life and culture. Following Jameson's model, she locates three "technologies, forms and institutions of visual (and audio) representation" (namely the photographic, the cinematic and the electronic) as corresponding to and co-constitutive of the "very temporal and spatial structure of the cultural logics Jameson identifies as realism modernism and postmodernism" (70).

Spectacle or Bust? The Case of The Truman Show

It is in light of the studies mentioned above that I would like to proceed, placing the narrative vs. spectacle issue within a postmodernist critical perspective. I am going to rely on the analysis of a recent New Hollywood release, Peter Weir's film *The Truman Show* (1998). A typical post-modernist piece, this film, instead of a genuine blockbuster, is selected to set the case, because it is reflective of the New Hollywood filmmaking practices and of the entire cultural climate of its time. Assuming that we can hold a tentative position, that will allow a separation of the text from its commercial intertext, just for the sake of analysis, we will focus exclusively on the text, figuring out as many of its reflexive aspects as possible which collectively make a comment on the current postmodernist New Hollywood situation. A starting point could be the film's subject-matter, which calls for a projection of itself as a Show of behemoth proportions, ("The Truman Show," within the film) and invites a comparison with the calculated blockbusters within the "logic of late capitalism" phase in (post)modern culture. Its intertextual character, reflective of the contemporary diversified multimedia market, offers commentary on the cinematic and the televisual, while the state-of-the-art technology involved in its making touches upon issues on problems of representation (the real vs. the hyperreal, simulation and simulacra) as well as all those related with the theory of the gaze (subjectivity and otherness, ontology of the image, phenomenology of perception, etc.). In terms of its thematic concerns,

the film also invites scrutiny on the politics of the image (surveillance, corporate control vs. individual freedom). All in all, the film, being reflective of the problematics of the postmodern condition in contemporary culture and life, raises the crucial question of the direction New Hollywood has taken towards the spectacular and the glitz of show-business.
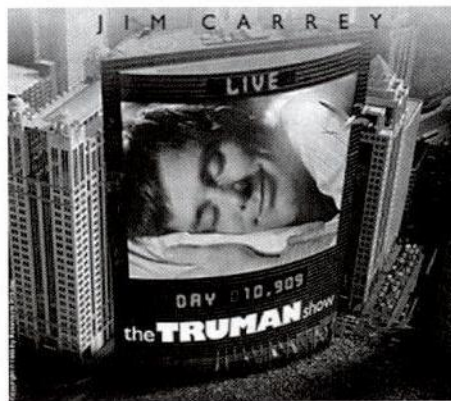
Picture 1. *"The Truman Show:" the biggest show on Earth*

Designed in the blockbuster mentality (high-concept, high-technology, ample advertising and saturation booking—the film was simultaneously shown in 2,315 screens in the U.S. and in 376 screens in the U.K), yet produced on a rather modest budget ($60 million), *The Truman Show* has behaved like a block-buster at the box-office: It recouped its production cost within one week since its opening (7 June 1998) in the U.S. ($ 64 million), and by mid October it climber over the $100 million barrier ($125 million) in profits; in England alone it picked up £9 million, while in the world market it grossed another $113 million ("Relea-se Dates and Business Data for The Truman Show" http://us.imdb. com).

But unlike *Godzilla*, that "bloated" blockbuster launched at the same time which got thumb-down reviews, *The Truman Show* received unanimous praise from the critics. Richard Corliss hails the film's ability to recapture some of the "metaphor and magic" of the old Hollywood films, leaving the viewer with a special "shiver of radiance"(*Time* time.webmaster@pathfinder.com). Barbara Shulgasser finds it as "political" as *Bulworth*, although more "subtle," saved by its director's talent from ending up as mere "science-fiction twaddle" (*San Francisco Examiner* www. sfgate.com). Stanley Kauffmann (*The New Repu-blic* www. thenewrepublic. com) deems it refreshing, due to the "novelty of its subject," as well as to the fact, that the film "has dash and daring;" while Ebert also points out the underlining ideas of the film which make it more than mere entertainment (*Chicago Sun Times* www. Suntimes.com). Finally for Heather

Clisby it is "one of the most important films of this decade," a "fitting, if not chilling summation" of our "sleazy, tabloid, nothing-is-too private culture" and a "wicked mirror of milleneum America" (*Movie Magazine International,* www.shoestring.org).

While my own critical response to the film's artistic merit is no different than most critics' appraisal of it as a powerful indictment of rampant technology and rote consumerism or as a "thought-stirring parable about privacy and voyeurism" (Guthmann www.aboutfilm.com), the real critical value of *The Truman Show* lies in the boldness of its central concept and its self-reflexivity which provides an apt metacommentary on the New Hollywood situation. In addition, what makes it a surprising revelation is the fact that the film employs the same high-tech production values that turns every other New Hollywood release into nothing more than high-concept and "computer-generated eye-candy" (Bolton www.24 framespersecond), yet this film has not abandoned interest in human life. It too has a high concept, and a brilliant one at that, but it is much more than high concept.

Writer Andrew Niccol, (and director of *Gattaca,* another extrapolating sci-fi fable), has based this film's main idea on a ludicrously far-fetched premise: what if, in the fast-evolving media-dominated society, an inspired televisionary producer was crafty enough to conceive of and realize a Show to eclipse every other television program? A 24-hour-a-day, thirty-days-a-month TV drama, aired live around the world for as long as its unwitting protagonist and real-life star Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) lived. For the needs of such a show, this TV wizard, appropriately named Christof (Ed Harris), would construct the world's largest man-made structure that along with the Great Wall of China would be visible from outer space. A huge domed studio, that envelops Seahaven Island

Picture 2. Seahaven Island: An Earthly Paradise

with its idyllic 50ish-looking town "of identical clapboard houses built around a curiously small business town center of corporate buildings and populated with the ideal demographic" (Whitehouse 9). Until his thirtieth year Truman didn't even come close to realizing that this Earthly paradise, replete with its surrounding fake ocean of gently lapping waves, its bright sun and its glowing moon, its digitally controlled weather-and its post-card-blue sky projected on the massive dome, is a completely artificial world that masterful Christof has created for his sake alone. Everyone else on the island, including his wife Meryl (Laura Linney), his best friend Marlon (Noah Emmerich) and his mother (Holland Taylor), is an actor, performing on a loosely designed script for his eyes only—just to convince him that his life is real. As Corliss comments, "in this scheme, Truman [as his name suggests] is the human, the one true man. Everything else is ...show" (time.webmaster@ pathfinder.com).

Unbeknownst to him, in the span of the three decades of his life, Truman has been being watched by the 5000 secret TV cameras which capture even the most intimate moments of his life (including his birth). He has been literally on TV, as every instance of his life is documented and broadcast live to a global audience thanks to Omnicom Corporation, the company that had adopted him from the day he was born and had turned his life into a reality show. Since this "candid camera on an epochal scale" of a show does not allow for interruptions, "The Truman Show's" staggering revenues are not generated by commercials but by the newly adopted lucrative practice in New Hollywood, "product placement." (Corliss ibid). Everything appearing on the show, from the six-pack that Marlon keeps conspicuously holding every time he visits the Burbanks and the dicer-peeler-grater, all-in-one "Chef's Pal" Meryl proudly flashes at Truman's face (and ours), to the actors' wardrobe, the foodstuff and the homes they live in, everything is included in the Truman sales catalogue.

Let us pause to consider for a while what implications the boldness of the

Picture 3. *Truman's bedimmpled wife Meryl is ideal for product placement*

film's premise has for the current state of globalization and media-dominated postmodern consumer culture. As it is stated in the "True-Talk Show," (a program inserted at dull moments to discuss issues growing out of "The Truman Show"), this monstrously huge project, which has over a 1.7 billion viewers, is broadcast live through satellite to 220 countries all day long, continues still triumphant in its 30th great year thanks to the evolution of technology and the incessant efforts of the population of a small town of technicians, experts and actors, and generates revenues that equal the gross income of a small country, is the creation of a single, multimedia conglomerate, the Omnicom Corporation.

Apart from a slight degree of exaggeration, necessary to give the film its futuristic tinge, there is not much difference between the achievements of the fictional Omnicom and the dominant status of its real-life counterparts (Viacom /Sony/ Matsushita/New Corporation/ Time-Warner) on the domestic and global media market. Globalization in the movie industry is already happening as the New Hollywood has established a stronghold in the European, East European and East Asian markets with the expansion of multiplex theaters. Satellite television and specially the Internet are on a more steady and advancing course toward globalization. With the development of HDTV, it will be a matter of the near future that TV Networks will reach the global dimensions (as predicted by Omnicom's status) of *The Truman Show*.

The process of globalization has been speeded up due to the cultural logic of late or consumer capitalism (Jameson 1984a) or due to the move from Fordist modes of production (studio system) to the post-Fordist (Harvey 1989) flexible circulation of capital and the merging of companies into multinational conglomerates. Globalization as a term "refers to the sense of global compression in which the world is increasingly regarded as 'one place' and it becomes much more difficult for nation-states to opt out of, or avoid the consequences of being drawn together into a progressively tight figuration through the increasing volume and rapidity of the flows of money, goods, people, information, technology and images" (Featherstone 81). This phenomenon reflects a fundamental shift in the notion of consumption in our consumer society, which as Featherstone points out, is no longer "considered as a mere reflex of production" but has assumed a central role to "social reproduction" (75); that is, the term *consumer culture* does not simply signify the increasing proliferation of products as commodities, but also the fact that cultural activities themselves are permeated by a consumption of signs and images. "Hence," Featherstone continues the argument (also developed by Baudrillard (1983a, 1993) and Jameson (1984a) in their respective critiques of postmodern culture),

> the term consumer culture points to the ways in which consumption ceases to be a simple appropriation of utilities, or use values, to become a consumption of signs and images in which the emphasis upon the capacity to endlessly reshape the cultural or symbolic aspect of the commodity makes it more appropriate to speak of

> *commodity signs*. The culture of a consumer society is therefore
> held to be a vast floating complex of fragmentary signs and images,
> which produces an endless sign-play which destabilize[s] long-held
> symbolic meanings and cultural order. (75, emphasis in original)

The premise on which the imaginative screenplay of *The Truman Show* depends
reflects the commodification of culture itself as explained above. Everything in
the televisual setting of "The Truman Show" is on sale, not for its use-value but
for its exchange value; items like the Elk Rotor Mower or the Mococoa drink on
the Truman catalogue are sold because they appear on the Show, like the Barbie
dolls or the Jurassic dinosaurs—themselves film by-products, or like any other
commodity item for that matter, whose price is largely determined by the popu-
larity of the celebrity figure advertising it (e.g. Citroen-Xsara by Claudia Schief-
fer), or the signature of the fashion designer on its name-tag (a Versace suit).

But what is actually on sale is life itself; for the audience of the "Truman
Show," Truman's life is the hottest commodity. It is so announced right from
the beginning of the film. As in Woody Allen's *Zelig*, Peter Weir begins the
movie with talking-head close-ups of Christof, Marlon and Meryl who offer off-
hand remarks on the quality of their show, allegedly speaking to their audience,
but actually addressing directly the film spectators. In the *technospeak*, characte-
ristic of the slightly exaggerated expedience of most advertising discourse, Chri-
stof claims in the opening lines of the film:

> We've become bored with watching actors giving us phony emo-
> tions. We're tired of pyrotechnics and special effects. While the
> world he inhabits is in some respects counterfeit, there is nothing
> fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue-cons. It's not always
> Shakespeare, but it's genuine. *It's a life*. (emphasis added)

There is a point hidden in Christof's remark above about people being tired of
"phony emotions" and "pyrotechnics" and "special effects," which is an indirect
indictment of the spectacular entertainment offered by the contemporary block-
buster. The implication being made is that what people really need is genuine
human experience that can not be catered for by the obviously contrived
contemporary (cinematic) fiction of special effects; an "authentic" experience
that only live television can offer. "Hence," Denzin remarks, "the preoccupation
with the live event, the on-site news broadcast, the immediate interpretation of
an event after it has occurred, the replaying of newsworthy events, the simulta-
neous broadcasting of an event and its reproduction on screen that audience
members can watch, in case they missed what they just witnessed" (1991: 51ft). If
we can assume that the millions of viewers of "the Truman Show" will suspend
their disbelief at the Capraesque fantasy of Seahaven island presented on the
television show and will be able to sustain interest in Truman's ideal life (no
matter how repetitive and boring its individual moments can get), then the deci-
sion of the Omnicom Corporation moguls to stake everything on the reality

show makes perfect sense. They have hit the jackpot capitalizing on the public's starving for authentic human experience. Judging by the size of their audience and the fact that every other network feeds on "The Truman Show," the revenues that this worldwide reality series generates must outweigh the grosses that even the most ambitious blockbuster could ever dream of. As advertised on True-Talk, the whole world has been watching the magic moment of Truman's birth; "220 countries tuned in for his first step; the world stood still for that stolen kiss. And as he grew, so did the technology. An entire human life, recorded on an intricate network of hidden cameras and broadcast live and unedited 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to an audience around the Globe."

Picture 4. *The elderly ladies, avid fans of Trumania*

Marlon (as Louis Coltrane) and Meryl (as Hannah Gill)[6] also speak in a similar vein, stressing the real-life experience emitted as a result of Truman's spontaneity: "It's all true, it's all real. Nothing about it is fake, it's merely controlled." But we, the actual film viewers, as well the television audience within the film, know that Truman's life is manipulated, that "The Truman Show" is exactly like the countless docu-dramas and real-life soap operas we gorge daily on our own TV screens. With the film within the film technique Peter Weir has ingeniously designed — a standard practice in the structure of postmodernist texts — we become bemused watching the reactions of the "real people" onscreen, the fictional audience of the television show. As Chris Bolton says, "A handful of them become familiar. The man who never seems to leave his bathtub; the parking garage attendants who would rather watch the show than retrieve your car; the patrons and employees at a place called "The Truman Bar," where it seems no one ever thinks or talks about anything else" (www. 24framespersecond.com).

Picture 5. *The Truman Bar*

We chuckle at Truman's fans for their regular devotion, their utter identification with, and the emotional investment they place in Truman's life. When Truman finds out about the deception and decides to escape from Seahaven island risking his life, they bet on him unanimously. And when he finally decides to make a grand exit, they explode in exuberant cheers, as if they had gained their own freedom. Obviously the diegetic audience, whose life is so empty that they depend upon the televised, manufactured life of a hapless, unaware man to fill the void, serves as a reflection on the real audience. Stanley Kauffmann has put it very aptly:

> the captive of TV is not Truman, it's the audience, US. And our love of that captivity, the gobbling of shows—fictional drama and news or sports or politics, but always shows—engulfs us. We used to go to theaters and films; now, more seductively than radio, TV comes to our homes, entwines us. ... The shows don't have to be dramatic, as "The Truman Show" and most TV attests. They need only to be shows, life outside transmitted to the TV inside. (www. thenewrepublic. com)

This insatiable hunger for shows and the increasing reliance on mediated than real experience marks off what Baudrillard terms an "ecstasy of communication" that defines postmodern life and culture. And this ecstasy is "obscene," he maintains, "because today there is a pornography of information and communication, a pornography of circuits and networks, ... of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more visible than visible" (1988a: 22). This is the age of simulations and the simulacra, of mediated representations and reproductions, images and signs that have taken up the place of objects and commodities in the fabric of social,

everyday life. To Baudrillard, the simulacrum "means an image, the semblance of an image, make-believe, or that which conceals the truth or the real" (Denzin 30). In the age of hyperreality, the essence of the postmodern moment is the admittance of the bankruptcy of the real, "when the real is no longer what it used to be" (Baudrillard 1983a: 12). Hence this premium on the real and lived experience in live presentation, which as Denzin remarks,

> only underscores the extent to which the 'aura' that previously surrounded lived experience, like the 'aura' of the 'original' work of art [as defined by] Benjamin (1955/1968: 223), has been erased. They have both become reproductions, separated from their original time and space, they have now become commodities which circulate inside the simulational model of communication. (1991: 31)

Baudrillard's theory of communication helps trace "the three historical orders of appearance where images and signs changed their relationship to reality" in western culture, as Denzin explains:

> These orders of appearance are: (1) the *counterfeit*, the 'dominant scheme of the "classical" period, from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution,' where signs reflected and then perverted a basic reality, art imitated life (Baudrillard 1988a: 83); (2) *production*, the dominant scheme of the industrial age, where signs masked the absence of a basic reality, as in the age of mass reproduction; (3) *simulation*, the reigning 'scheme of the current phase,' where signs now bear no relationship to any reality (Baudrillard 1983a: 83). (Denzin 1991: 30)[7]

Arguably, *The Truman Show* is reflective not only of the postmodern condition of hyperreality, but it can also be conceived as playing up with the three-stage evolution of the sign in the history of representation:

(1) Counterfeit, in its sense of being a nostalgic narrative of the '50s. Truman's world is such a faithful representation of a period (which has been nostalgically revisited by the so-called "movie brats") that appears as if "freshly-scrubbed on the surface."[8] It is always fair weather on Seahaven island, the streets are spotless, the people are smiling—a heavenly paradise. As Richard Corliss observes, "the film's light is so soothing, beckoning a near life-experience. Its cool glow is so intense, you may feel you're getting a gentle tan as you watch the film" (time.webmaster@pathfinder.com). Admiring an incredibly fabulous sunset Marlon exclaims: "That's the Big Guy. Quite a big paint-brush he's got." His ambiguous remark brings home the point that the "whole kit and kaboodle" is fake, not God Almighty's creation, but the ingenious creation of an eccentric and inspired televisionary. As a period piece (of the '50s), with a realism observed to the tiniest detail, Truman's world is perfect: art imitating life. But since it never

ceases being a reproduction or a copy, it offers by definition a perverted picture of an era, so dear to a hippie-generation of filmmakers that keep on revisiting it in nostalgia narratives (*American Graffiti, Blue Velvet, Body Heat*).

Incidentally, nostalgia films have been given special attention by postmodern theorists (e.g. Jameson 1983) as symptomatic of "a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history" (117). However, others like Lash (1988: 326-8) maintain that such films, whether mainstream or self-reflexive, "do more than colonize the present in a way that symbolizes an inability to 'focus on our own present,'" which is Jameson's thesis. More than that, Lash continues, "such non-discursive, figural texts problematize and make unstable the very ability to represent, hence capture the 'real'"(1988: 328-9). "They appropriate," Denzin adds, "the residual past through pop images which simultaneously mock the past and the present" (46).

Marlon's remark above about the creator's powerful brush brings us to the second stage of the sign on which the film reflects:

(2) Production. Truman's story is so refreshing and riveting that as Anthony Leong puts it, it ends before we have the chance "to explore the logistical nightmare of running such a television show. Actors' demands for higher salaries, rehearsals, story development, what the cast members do outside the show" (www.eyepiece.com), let alone the manpower and the finance that the production design of such a gigantic project requires. Christof controls the 5000 hidden cameras and other sophisticated electronic equipment from the control room, strategically placed on top of the dome, on the moon of Truman's universe. When we consider the immensity of the network and the dissemination of visual information around the globe, we are left with a sense of time and space fragmentation. "All surface," Vivian Sobchack contends,

Picture 6. *Truman Show producer Christof at the studio's control room*

electronic space can not be inhabited. It denies or prosthetically transforms the spectator's physical body so that subjectivity and affect free-float or free-fall or free-flow across a horizontal / vertical grid. Subjectivity is at once decentered and completely extroverted — again erasing the modernist (and cinematic) dialectic between inside and outside and its synthesis of discontinued time and discontinuous space as conscious and embodied experience. (58)

We find ourselves in an existential limbo, trying to recuperate from a pervasive sense of derealization, to use Virilio's term,[9] effected by the impact of the electronic image upon our subjectivity. This decentering of the self in the two-dimensional, spatio-temporal fluidity of electronic space is perfectly conveyed in cinematic form by Peter Weir. In just a single shot he manages to combine the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of three textual levels: in the True-talk interview the camera captures, in the same frame, Sylvia looking at Christof on her TV screen, which includes an insert small "window" of Truman having breakfast. Thus, narratively speaking, we are presented with three distinct ontological levels: Truman's world at the hypodiegetic level, subject to the gaze of Sylvia's and Christof's world, as they occupy the diegetic level, and a hyperdiegetic or metadiegetic level, effected by the gaze of Christof's panoptic tower, a gaze which controls both the hypodiegetic and the diegetic worlds, and coincides with that of the actual spectator. Thus this welter of different perspectives and perceptual sites signals an uncertain subject position vis-a-vis narrative space and time; as spectators, we are confused in our engagement with the world, say choosing between the comfortable stability of the Seahaven utopia and the flat, free-floating, disembodied space of network communication.

The film's three-level textual structure which celebrates the electronic 'instant' and refuses a grounding investment of the human body and "enworlded living experience" in the depthless electronic space, results in the conception of the Truman show as simulation, "a system that constitutes 'copies' lacking an 'original' origin" (Sobchack 58). This reflects on the third order of the simulacra in Baudrillard's theory, in which "the very definition of the real becomes: *that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction* ... the real is not only what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced, the hyperreal* (1983a: 146 italics in original).

(3) Simulation: The stage in which the sign has become reality by masking the fact that there is no basic reality; the reign of the hyperreal as a major symptom and simultaneously contributing cause to the postmodern moment. In the realm of the cool media communication, history and memory have become endangered forms; all that has prevailed is the sense of a "perpetual present" of hyperreal space, of the virtual reality of cinematic and televisual representations. "The postmodern society is an [essentially] dramaturgical society," Denzin claims and accounts for the "cinematization of contemporary life" on the basis of a tri-partied argument:

> First, reality is a staged, social production. Secondly, the real is now judged against its staged, cinematic-video counterpart (Baudrillard, 1983a: 152). Third, the metaphor of the dramaturgical society (Lyman, 1990: 221), or 'life as theater' (Brisset and Edgley, 1990: 2; Goffman, 1959: 254-5) has now become international reality. The theatrical aspects of the dramaturgical metaphor have not 'only creeped into everyday life' (Goffman, 1959: 254), they have taken it over. Art not only mirrors life, it structures and reproduces it. (1991 preface x)

Pursuing the analysis of *The Truman Show* we can follow Denzin's argument point by point to see how the film reflects on this *cinematization*. The first point needs little elaboration as it is evident that Weir's movie is centered on the notion of Truman's life as a staged production, as a show. This has already been amply discussed above. The only thing that remains to be added is that, in its globalized, electronic and network communications setting, the film reflects on the current situation of neo-collonial expansion of the American culture dominating the global village. In the context of the extended satellite communication system, controlled by multinational conglomerates or state corporate structures, there is a proliferation of narratives, of a distinctly popular-culture ideological tinge, placing a premium value on family, sexuality, violent action, work, leisure. Fashioned by the genius of the New Hollywood system, these "Pro-Oedipal stories," as Barthes (1975) has called them, "are marketed, distributed, sold and consumed" in the newly dominated markets of Europe, Russia and East European countries, as well as in the Third World (Denzin 8). They find simultaneous outlet in a variety of media, such as the popular press, advertising, popular cinema, computer games, and television programs, appropriating neo-or recycled American popular culture genres, such as sitcoms, crime and action dramas, family melodramas and soap operas. Despite some variety effected by the mixing of genres and their intertextual tendencies, they "involve the telling and retelling of a very small number of stories, contained and re-contained within the above genre forms" (Denzin 8). Through its reflexivity, *The Truman Show* is both a critique of these cultural practices as well as one of its most outstanding paradigms.

The second point, the real contested by its cinematic-televisual counterpart, has also been touched above, but deserves some supplementary argumentation. The film deploys a visual discourse structure based on the conflict between the real (as expressed by the content of the reality show — Truman's authentic life) and the virtual reality of the simulated live representation. In other words, the film pushes the epistemological commitment to cognitive values (Truman's search of existential knowledge) to the ontological issue of world making and unmaking — a clearly postmodernist endeavor.[10] This is very deftly dramatized by the filmmaker in two key-scenes.
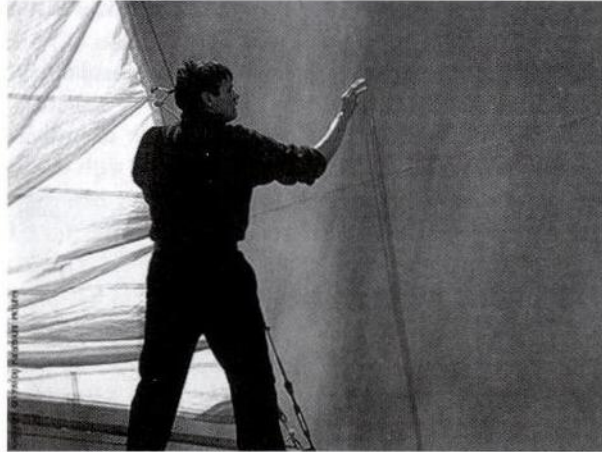
Picture 7. *Truman at the end of his universe*

When Truman reaches the limits of his fake world, Christof comes in touch with him for the first time and tries to convince him to stay, claiming that the sheltered life his counterfeit, manufactured and simulated world provides is better. The key-items prominently featuring in their dialogue are the words "real," "true" and "world":

Christof: Truman. You can speak. I can hear you.

Truman: Who are you?

Christof: I am the creator of a television show that gives hope and joy and inspiration to millions.

Truman: And who am I?

Christof: You are the *star.*

Truman: Was nothing *real?*

Christof: *You* were real. It's *what* made you so good to watch. Listen to me Truman. There is no more *truth* out there ... than in the world I created for you. The same lies. The same deceit. Only in my *world,* you have nothing to fear.

In the second scene, during the exclusive interview he gives on "True Talk," Christof defends his position that the virtual reality of his simulated world by far outweighs the merits of life "in the real world:" In the argument he has with a former member of the cast, Truman's true sweetheart Lauren (Sylvia in the diegetic world), now removed from the 'set,' the latter accuses him of being a liar and a manipulator, who suffers no pangs of guilt for "taking a baby's life and turning it into some kind of mockery." To this he replies: "I have given Truman a chance to lead a normal life. The world ... the place you live in, is a sick place. Seahaven is the way the world should be." Implicit in Christof's argument is the idea that the world of global network communication outside Sea-

haven, and by extension our world, is no less counterfeit, no less inauthentic, no less voyeuristic than Truman's virtual-reality world.

Denzin's third point refers to the ocular and spectacular aspect of representation which has permeated not only everyday life, but structures and reproduces art as well. We will have to take recourse to the narrative structure of Weir's movie and its voyeuristic setting. The film opens with documentary-like shots of the producer and the main actors of the show, offering behind-the-scene comments on the "virtues" of this extraordinary production, framing thus the main story about Truman's life. Simultaneously, there are inserts of the television show credits and its star Truman, as well as a time marker (Day 10909) like those dotting the expositional shots in some films. Thus Weir puts the film spectator in a privileged position allowing for multiple perceptual perspectives of both the diegetic and the hypodiegetic worlds, which accounts for the window within window stylistic approach and the film within film narrative structure. As a result, the filmtext acquires a metafictional character and its narrative strategy facilitates the foregrounding of ontological issues at the expense of the epistemological ones.

Technically, Weir achieves this transworld violation of ontological limits through distanciation devices such as frame-break and intertextuality, which are standard postmodernist practices. The integrity of the hypodiegetic narrative, that is, the maintenance of the illusion of reality in Truman's world is not retained because of the voyeuristic setting created by the organization of a number of scopic regimes. Weir has devised an enormous amount of visual tricks to suggest the "mobilized and virtual gaze" of the simulated, corporal world of surveillance electronics. His camera appropriates the most improbable and unusual focalization points or angles to simulate the 5000 hidden cameras on the 'set:' While there are some "objective"point-of-view shots, which, as in mainstream cinema, suggest the invisible position of an observer within the diegetic world (usually from the standard height of a person's eyes) — for instance, showing Truman in front of his car greeting his neighbor; as well as some "subjective" point-of-view shots to designate the reciprocal or returned gaze of a diegetic character (e.g. Truman's neighbor), most shots adopt a completely unnatural and extreme angle, from below, from the top and sideways, that suggest the clearly voyeuristic gaze of the non-human, spying gaze of electronic surveillance devices. Shots from a hidden camera in Meryl's necklace, in the dashboard or rear-view mirror of Truman's car, shots from the waves through underwater-hidden cameras, render Truman the sole focal point of the gaze of three kinds of voyeurs: ironically "the only true man" in this voyeuristic setting becomes the unwitting dupe of the show. That is, he becomes subject to the gaze of everyone else who is "in the know", the actors on the set (at the hypodiegetic level), the crew of the television production and the members of its audience (at the diegetic level), and the actual members of the audience in the cinema auditorium, made privy to a third, and hence more powerful order of the look,[11] a gaze effected by the text's reflexivity (at the meta-diegetic or metafictional level). The effect of the director's

distanciation devices is overwhelmingly fresh, as we cue on to Weir's complex and extreme to the point of ridiculousness visual game, catering to the libidinal satisfaction of the sensory organ that postmodernity has deemed with ultimate importance, the eye.
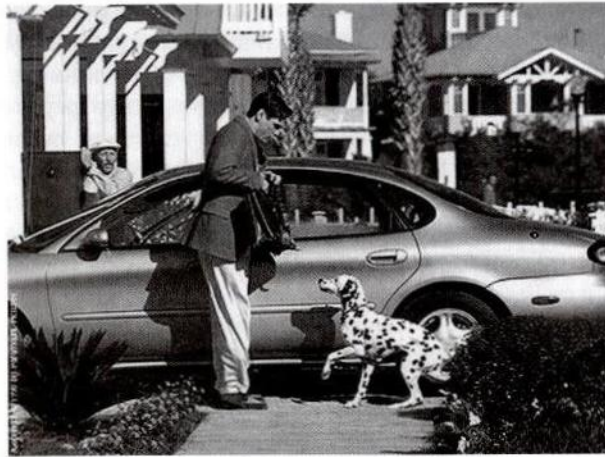
Picture 8. *An objective shot of Truman*

Like Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, which has been called "a paradigmatic study of spectatorship and voyeurism",[12] *The Truman Show* could be read as a (metafictional) allegory of the power of the virtual gaze, effected by the (new) cinematic and televisual apparatuses. Actually, Weir's movie is the obverse of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*: L.B. Jefferies was the only one holding the position of the panoptic voyeur's gaze, subjecting the whole world around him to its scrutinizing look. Here, the whole world, whether within the boundaries of Seahaven Island, or the larger one outside, subjects one individual, Truman Burbank, to its overpowering, spying gaze. Hitchcock's film, as a quasi- or covert metafiction, marked the transition from modernism to postmodernism by foregrounding its ontological questions through the device of the returned gaze, of the voyeur-vu, that shattered the "fourth wall" of conventional theatricality. When Thorwald discovers the gaze of the voyeur, the gaze of the "other" coming from outside the confines of his private world, he invades the voyeur's space, Jefferies apartment, and Jefferies, who in the voyeuristic setting of the film is a surrogate for the film spectator, suffers the consequences of his action, of the *voyeur-vu*. Thus, through this transworld violation of ontologically distinct realms Hitchcock's film dramatizes the "theatrical aspects of the dramaturgical metaphor," as they creep in and take over real life, suggesting a postmodern way or mode of being in the world, the world of art "mirroring life," structuring

it and even reproducing it.

In *The Truman Show,* Weir signals off the overt postmodernist character of his text by foregrounding the theatrical aspects of this methaphor from the very beginning. Structurally he complements the staggering visual effects of frame-break (as presented above) with an implementation of aspects of the plot that set the story of this phony world in motion, employing "a slow-burning approach," as Damian Cannon suggests, "that masks real power" (www.film.u-net.com). After the first expository shots that introduce us to the idyllic world of Seahaven — Truman leaving home for work in a fabulous morning, exchanging pleasantries with the neighbors, driving his car, buying a newspaper and a magazine, chatting with prospective customers on the street — all events presented through unusual or queer focalization points, strange things begin happening which make Truman suspicious that his "down pat" life is not as normal as it seems: A strange object looking like a studio lamp falls literally from the sky in the street, a few feet outside his front door.

Picture 9. *A strange object from the sky puzzles Truman*

A homeless man, resembling his long-lost father, is picked up by two strangers and forcefully removed from the 'set,' before he has time to find out. While sitting on the beach alone, a shaft of rain only five feet wide hits him, and when he moves, the beam of rain moves with him. While driving his car, there is a sudden change in the radio frequency describing his every move with the accuracy a sports event reported live. These are parts of the complication stage of the plot, mysterious and intriguing enough to secure audience involvement in the story. However, in combination with another set of clues that reveals Truman's TV existence, they establish the context of conspiracy and paranoia in which the hero finds himself, like Pacula's *The Parallax View* (1974) or Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), themselves landmarks of paranoid fiction from the mid-Seventies. However, "in the Nineties strain of paranoid cinema

[The Game, Dark City, or The Truman Show]," as Jonathan Romney puts it,

> the stakes seem at once more rarefied and more fundamental than they were. The new paranoia movies have less to do with political anxieties, more to do with the feeling that there is little verifiable reality in the screen image itself, and by extension, in the world we know through visual media. It's no longer a question of who is to be trusted, as in the Seventies, but a question of whether *anything*, any image, any evidence of the state of things, can be trusted. (39, italics in original).

In the postmodernist discourse characteristic of most contemporary texts, an ambivalent attitude is maintained in the narrative mode favoring the simultaneous acceptance of seemingly irresolute or opposing interpretation outcomes, blurring thus the distinction between a surface reality and the possibility that it all might prove to be mere fabrication. *The Truman Show* works so well on a self-reflexive level because the narrative events are presented with that kind of ambivalence which allows us to perceive them as simultaneously true and fake, as belonging both inside and outside the context of signification and referentiality.

Hence the intertextual character of the movie. Most of the exposition and complication shots described above, as well as many shots in the rest of the narrative, are invested with an intertextual nuance at the same time they fulfill the text' narrative demand for story development. With subtle allusions and references to at least a dozen other films, the text opens up a web of horizontal relationships with other texts (and in this way it reflects on the horizontal integration of multimedia New Hollywood conglomerate production and consumption tendencies).[13] For example, the incident with the stage light dropping from the sky immediately brings to mind the mysterious slab touched by the apes in *2001: A Space Odyssey* with the unmistakable notion at knowledge intimated from a superior being. As a matter fact, Truman's motions and tentative touching of the object, literally appearing from nowhere, seem to have been patterned on the movement of the apes.

The panoramic view of the Seahaven business center, taken with a crane shot, reminds of the metro square in Truffaut's *Day for Night,* in which Alphonse must shoot his rival. The same shot also brings to mind the community center in Punxutawney Town where the custom of weather prediction takes place in *Groundhog Day.* The reference is made to the iterative kind of narrative these two films have by the self-conscious repetition of the same visual and audio narrative motifs: The repeated takes the shooting of the scene requires in Truffaut's film, the experience of re-living the same day in a million of variations in *Groundhog.* In both sequences, repetition is announced on the soundtrack by a characteristic music theme. The same technique is observed both by Truman's "Good morning" catch-phrase as well as the Motzart piece signaling off the iterative appearance of the Seahaven town center, in which people all around

Picture 10. *The Square at Seahaven town center*

Truman go through their motions like clockwork. Later in the film, when he notices the pretense of the extras' behaviour, Truman makes Meryl observe the recurrence of the staged action in the square on the rear-view mirror of his car:

> Truman: Look! I predict that in just a moment, we will see a lady
> on a red bike, followed by a man with flowers and a Folks-
> wagen beetle with a dented fender. Lady, flowers, and ...
> Meryl: and ...
> Truman: there it is, there's that dented beetle! Don't you want to
> know how I did that? I'm gonna tell you! They're on a loop.
> The go around the block. They come back. They go around
> again. They just go round and round.

Like Thorswald in *Rear Window*, Truman discovers that he had been being spied upon all the time, but unlike Thorswald, who has the look of someone who has something to hide while unbeknownst to him that he is already subject to the gaze of others, Truman's look resembles that of the protagonists in Carpenter's *They Live* or in Siegel's and/or Kauffman' *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* when they find out that aliens have taken over the bodies of human beings. After listening to the wrong frequency on the car's radio, Truman stops the car and looks at the people around with such suspicion as if they were alien beings. Upon entering the lobby of a corporate building, Truman witnesses people idling in a room hidden by the façade of an elevator's doors. This incident is such an eye opener for Truman as wearing the special glasses had been for Keith David in *They Live.* They both realize they are in a show, and everyone around them is playing out a role at their expense.

Other, less obvious allusions or references can be recounted. The way Weir's camera focuses on Lauren's/Sylvia's emerald bracelet, to signify Truman's love interest in the girl, may remind one of a similar use of a bracelet, made into the focal point of the investigative gaze by detective Poirot in Guy Hamilton's *Evil Under the Sun*. In that film too, Poirot is given the opportunity to notice an expensive-looking bracelet on the hand of a mysterious woman, otherwise hidden from his view, who has an illicit love affair with the film's *jeune-premier*, and later on identify that woman as the famous stage actress, Arlena Marshall, by the same necklace that she was wearing.

Moreover, the reference to Truman as the first child adopted by a corporation, unlike a critic's claim, links the film with *Citizen Kane*, since Charles Foster Kane holds that title as the first child to be adopted by a trust. Charles Whitehouse traces the film's pedigree to Patrick McGoohan's television series *The Prisoner*, on the basis of its similarity with it as a "Kafka-inspired allegory of 'real life,' pushed to a biblical level here," with Christof as a god-like, benevolent and powerful creator, whom his creation must outwit (9).

The last, epiphanic scene, where Truman meets his creator (a reminder of a similar scene at the end of Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Breakfast of Champions*), marks the high point of the narrative towards which all of the self-reflexive narrative techniques had been directed: the point at which the epistemological reading of the story, as an existential quest of the self and his place in the universe, switches to a multi-level ontological allegory of the power of the media in determining our mode of being in the world. As Whitehouse puts it, "*The Truman Show* depicts soap opera as a spectacular conflict between a man and his god, a worker and his employee, a 'father' and his son and—if we can indulge in a little more intertextual methaphor, a star and his studio" (10).

This point is amply highlighted in true postmodernist fashion through a literalization of the theatrical metaphor, to return to Denzin's argument. When the foremast of the boat pierces through the fragile shell of Truman's artificial world and Truman literally touches the limits of his universe, the illusion of what until that moment constituted his world is shattered. The existential question of who he is and what he is doing in this world is replaced by the ontological issue of whether he accepts the given identity of a star in an obviously contrived milieu, or to assert his individuality and free will by choosing to live in freedom.

As a postmodern allegory of the spectacle then, *The Truman Show* is quite an entertaining fable that subjects Truman to the ontological indignities of being taken from his mother's womb, raised and psychologically molded to the whims of an eccentric and fanciful animator God. Part of the film's success is owed to the fact that Jim Carrey was selected to play Truman, "Mr. Rubberface" himself, as one critic calls him, who, under the guidance of Weir, exercises restraint on his wackiness and "gives a graceful and sweet performance" that redefines him as an actor with a potential for dramatic roles.[14] As his name suggests, Carrey must take on the role of everyman, a person to relate with than laugh at, who at the same time possesses qualities that set him off as an exceptional
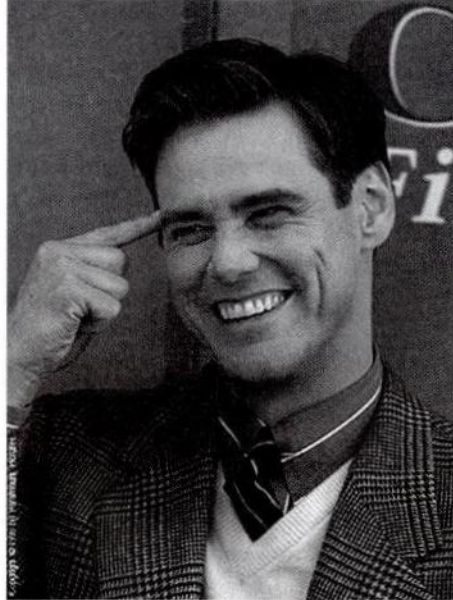
Picture 11. *Jim Carrey: the man with the thousand faces*

being, if he is to be believable as a renowned celebrity, a super TV star. Perhaps better than any critic's was Weir's conception of Truman's role: "Truman isn't [just] the man next door. He 's someone who was brought up by wolves and lived in a nest of liars. ...There was a lot of grinning by overfriendly people trying to gain his influence. Thus he has a public persona, an exaggerated external self; there is something alien about Jim, an 'otherness' that worked (Corliss time. webmaster@ pathfinder.com).

The otherworldliness motif, as well other minor ones (acquaphobia), must be attributed to the imagination of screenplay writer Niccol, as a comparison with *Gattaca* attests. *The Truman Show,* Whitehouse suggests, can be seen "as an inversion of the Gattaca story: There, exclusion from the in-crowd was a matter of genetics, and the naturally born hero had to fake his way in. With *The Truman Show,* though, we the audience are the in-crowd, and the unnatural hero has to break out from unwitting celebrity to become one of us" (9).

Most of the credit, nevertheless, must go to Peter Weir, who has taken this seminal idea and realized it to "sunnily subversive perfection" (Corliss time-webmaster @ pathfinder.com). He has forged his material into the desired mold with the same detached dexterity and supple easiness that his big auteur in the sky, his alter ego, Christof, has shaped Truman's life. The film is not only a definite crowd pleaser, "so verdant with metaphor and emotion, that it works on any viewer's level" (Corliss) but pregnant with thought-provoking thematic con-

cerns: "our horror of totalitarianism, our love of personal freedom, our belief—justified or deluded—that knowledge is a powerful tool and that access to information is a God-given right" (Shulgasser www.sfgate.com). However, its supreme value lies with its metafictional character, as a sophisticated allegory of the media-bent virtual reality in both contemporary life and art.

As Romney points out, "*The Truman Show* is timely in its reminder of the tenuous division between real and media worlds," and its one virtue is the "very thorough dissection of the entertainment-complex machinery behind such life-like chimarae" (41) as its docu-soap setting suggests. "The world of *The Truman Show*" he continues, "isn't a given, it has to be manufactured and sustained by extensive technology"(41). But as Martin Heidegger has been quoted saying, "the essence of technology is nothing technological" (Sobchack 51). Because technology, as Sobchack contends, is not invented, improved or exploited in "a neutral context or for a neutral effect. Rather it is always historically informed not only by its materiality but also by its political, economic, and social context, and thus always both co-constitutes and expresses cultural values" (51). As a film reflexive of the current situation in New Hollywood, *The Truman Show's* ultimate achievement is to show exactly how today's advanced digital technology manifests itself in the political, economic and socio-cultural context of multimedia conglomerate production and consumption of the moving image industry. Christof is the embodiment of the visionary auteur in the classical cinema, who like, say, another Joseph Von Sternberg, goes to extraordinary lengths to create the ideal universe of Seahaven: with attention to the tiniest detail, from the cover of a magazine and the name on the six-pack, to the rows of the whitewashed, sunlit houses and the stretch of the ocean around it, everything has to be designed and specially created to be a prop. Even the actors, when ordered to freeze and assume "first positions" are reduced to props. "Yet," as Romney maintains,

> such a dream belongs to the past, for today filmmaking on the grand scale rarely resorts to such huge measures and in future may never have to again. As film production leaves the realm of the concrete and embraces the virtual, cinematic illusion has less to do with building [elaborate] sets, more to do with digital effects (witness *Titanic*, whose making was a transitional stage between the two modes). (42)

While one may well agree with Romney that as a representation "*The Truman Show* looks like the revenge of old fashioned, three-dimensional mise-en-scène" (42), and this, despite the fact that it is a state-of-the-art production that digital technology affords today, yet it can not be ascertained that the analysis so far has resolved the spectacle vs. narrative debate with reference to all those blockbusters regularly produced by the New Hollywood entertainment machine. The public will be kept being inundated with grandiose spectaculars about dinosaurs

and meteors whose narrative complexity will amount to no more than an idea and a half. Films like *Event Horizon, Armaggedon* or *Anaconda,* whose action revolves around a single idea—facing a threat of gigantic proportions, and the rest is filling-in material for the sake of the show, will keep on appearing on the big screen, because they represent the new kind of Hollywood filmmaking.

If the present analysis accomplishes anything, that must be the need to become aware of the changed nature of contemporary movies in the production and the consumption ends of cultural communication. Understanding that the movies are produced in a totally different economic, technological and cultural context helps to appreciate their different mode of address to the public. Perhaps, a new, phenomenological approach to the mobilized and virtual gaze, effected by the new cinematic and electronic apparatuses, will be necessary to accept the shift from narration modes to spectacular sensation. Technology itself has been instrumental in the change of the mode of address of contemporary blockbusters. It makes a lot of a difference to watch the latest multimillion production in the comfort of the wide screen and Dts sound of a multiplex theater, or enjoy the unparalleled visual and audio "kinesthetic" experience that a DVD guaranties in a home cinema environment.

Certainly, the narrative integrity of the old classical movies is a thing of the past. More likely, we are witnessing a new kind of narrative, positing a post-modern, inter-textual, hyper-real, virtual reality, what Lyotard has termed the "petty, individual, heroic meta-narrative, as standing some chance against the collapse of all grand meta-narratives (1979/1984 xxiv)."

After all, the Hollywood industry has not gone completely brain dead. Some "resistance" may still be evident "in surprise hits of non-blockbuster mentality productions, in moderately-priced star vehicles financed and distributed by the majors, even in low-budget art films and imports, that aim at preserving narrative integrity, developing some new talent, and maintaining a steady supply of dependable and culturally acclaimed mainstream product", as Schatz points out (34). Films like *sex, lies and videotape, My Left Foot, Cinema Paradiso, Fried Green Tomatoes, Thelma and Louise, The Sixth Sense, Seven, The Game, The Matrix, The Insider, American Beauty, The Green Mile, All About My Mother,* which, one way or another being the exception to the rule, become, through their reflexivity, or their artistic superiority, a comment on, and a critique of, the postmodern condition: "the commodified and mobilized" nature of contemporary (virtual) motion pictures.

Notes

1. The first changes that Hollywood faced at the culmination of its pure classical phase mark the beginning of its post-classical period, which both Ray and Schatz consider as a distinct period (1945-1960). With the decline of European markets, due to the second World War, Hollywood was facing the chance of expanding its operations abroad, while the situation domestically seemed most promising (audience attend-

ance had peaked in 1946). However, the rise of television (which would threaten cinema's cultural pre-eminence as the dominant means of family entertainment), the de-homogenization of the audience (due to demographic or other reasons—life in suburbia, the baby boom), the anti-trust law (1948) which forced the Hollywood majors to lose their distribution monopoly (and brought about the abolition of the vertical integration structure of the studios and the decline of the Hollywood industry), constituted some of the major challenges that Hollywood had to face and overcome in order to ensure its survival.

2. There has been a critical dispute around the term "New Hollywood." It seems that critics rushed to use this term to designate a new period or moment in the history of the film industry, every time Hollywood was facing dramatic changes. Thus the term was used periodically to mark the immediate post-war era that challenged the studio-system, as mentioned above; then it was applied again to designate the so-called Hollywood Renaissance period (1960 or 1965 to 1975), when the American film came closer to the artistic predilections of the European art cinema; but finally, by general agreement, New Hollywood has come to define the post-1975 era in which the industry was completely transformed with the establishment of the blockbuster mentality and its huge economic success.

3. But Buckland's argument, overlapping with that of Elizabeth Cowie's ("Storytelling: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Classical Narrative," also published in Neale and Smith [1998]), challenges Bordwell's and Staiger's thesis that classical narrative (defined by the "well-made" qualities) always coincides with classical Hollywood cinema practices. Buckland's analysis shows that a veritable blockbuster which is by definition supposed to have deviated from classical narrative norms has its roots in the episodic structure of the B movie of the '30s and '40s; Cowie also claims that there have been storytelling modes in the classical cinema that do not necessarily respect the well-made qualities associated by Bordwell et al. with the classical cinema.

4. For an update of Virtual Reality (VR) systems, their historical evolution and the current state of affairs, see Michael Allen's "From Bwana Devil to Batman Forever: Technology in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema," in Neale and Smith (1998): 109-129. The article contains a section on VR (with related bibliography), from which I quote one paragraph, extremely illuminating to my thesis: "The 'heightened experience', spectacular, non-narrative nature of VR links it back to earlier, multi-sensory systems such as Cinerama and IMAX. In doing so, it demonstrates that the traditional two-hour fictional feature film is only one of several audio-visual entertainment formats attractive to audiences" (Neale and Smith 127).

5. Which is another overt self-reflexive technique shattering the fictional illusion of the narrative.

6. These are their diagetic names within the "reality" of the show.

7. Robert Stam's reading of Baudrillard's theory of simulacra (1983a) posits four stages of the order of the sign. Actually he attributes two different phases to Denzin's category of 'Counterfeit' (Stam and Miller 756).

8. Corliss (time.webmaster@pathfinder.com). Corliss' phraze is an apt description of the glossy character of images, like that of TV aesthetics that postmodern contemporary movies appropriate as a rule.

9. I am using this term much in the same way as used by J. P. Telotte in his analysis of Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (*Film Quarterly* 53.2 [Winter 1998]: 32-8).

10. Consider here Brian McHale's distinction between the epistemological concerns in

modernist fiction, where the text raises cognitive questions (modes of knowing), and the ontological ones in postmodernist fiction, where post-cognitive issues (modes of being) are foregrounded (5-12).

11. This audiovisual situation bears resonances of the Lacanian order of the "three looks", as employed in his seminar on Poe's "The Purloined Letter" to discuss hermeneutic codes. Lacan's notion of the power of the gaze applies to the situation in the beginning, when Truman does not suspect anything. Thus, Truman's look may be equated with the King's in Poe's story, which sees, but notices nothing; Christof's with the Queen's, which is a look that sees that the first did not notice anything and deludes itself as to the secret it hides (Christot is confident that his tricks will keep Truman deluded for ever, as a guarantee for the continuation of the show); and finally, the third look is the most powerful as it rests with the spectator's view, who like Minister D's (and later Dupin's), is a look that sees the first two looks which leave what should be hidden exposed to plain view, whereby the greatest advantage can be gained.

12. In Robert Stam's study *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research P., 29-71.

13. See Schatz (33-34) who argues that younger viewers, who largely comprise the audience of New Hollywood, show a greater competence on the intertextual character of contemporary blockbusters through their exposure to other multimedia cultural products (rock songs, computer games, comic books) based on film, who can thus appreciate the narrative in "ways which may well be lost on middle-aged male critics".

14. Carrey does not have many sympathies with most critics, hence the characterization "Rubberface" by Vladimir V. Zelevinsky "*The Truman Show*: Jim Carrey isn't all fun and Games," *The Tech* 118.28 (12 June 1998); but even those who do not like him as an actor admit that his performance in this film is quite good. I am quoting here Edward Guthmann of the *San Francisco Examiner* (www. sfgate.com) who, like several other critics, attributes Carrey's "graceful and sweet performance" to Peter Weir's directing talent, who had also guided another talented comedian actor, Robin Williams, to try successfully more dramatic roles.

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